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Viewing cable 09ANKARA287, CODEL DURBIN: TALKING CYPRUS -- AND HALKI -- WITH

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09ANKARA287	2009-02-23 17:18	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Ankara

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000287

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SUBJECT: CODEL DURBIN: TALKING CYPRUS -- AND HALKI -- WITH
THE TURKS

REF: ISTANBUL 73

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: CODEL Durbin, led by Assistant Majority Leader Senator Richard Durbin, met with senior GOT officials February 19 on bilateral relations, Cyprus, and efforts by the Greek Orthodox Church to reopen Halki Theological Seminary for training of priests. During the meetings, Senator Durbin emphasized the importance with which USG officials, both in the executive and legislative branches, view the US-Turkey strategic relationship. He emphasized that following meetings in Cyprus, he believes 2009 offers a historic opportunity to achieve a comprehensive settlement and end over 40 years of conflict on the island. GOT officials expressed hope that negotiations between Cypriot leaders Christofias and Talat will soon become more intense and urged the US to consider naming a special envoy, who can urge both sides (but especially the Greek Cypriots) to move forward more expeditiously. A group of Turkish opinion makers sounded a pessimistic note on Cyprus negotiations, claiming ROC President Christofias and the Greek Cypriots have no motivation to reach a settlement and will seek to draw out negotiations well into 2010. All GOT interlocutors emphasized the extreme damage to Turkey-US relations that would ensue should an Armenian Genocide Resolution pass in the US House of Representatives or US Senate, or should President Obama characterize the tragic events of 1915 as "genocide" in his statement marking April 24 as Armenian Remembrance Day. END SUMMARY

President Gul

¶2. (C) Senator Durbin emphasized to President Gul that the U.S. values Turkey's friendship and loyalty and expressed appreciation for Turkish support through its positive contributions to NATO, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and on counterterrorism. He also underscored continued strong US support for Turkey's EU accession aspirations. Explaining his appreciation for the complicated nature of Cyprus reunification talks, Durbin expressed hope that a final solution could be reached this year that would bring to an end the island's long, sad, bloody history. He also expressed admiration for T/C "President" Talat, G/C President Christofias, and their lead negotiators, Nami and Iacovou, saying that it required a great deal of political courage to resume talks last year, and expressed hope that Turkey could do all it can to encourage successful negotiations, to include possible "symbolic" steps.

¶3. (C) President Gul responded that Turkey has given its full support to Talat. Turkey is sincere in its hopes for a real solution and full-fledged cooperation on the island. However, what is required is a solution that will be viable and lasting. Gul noted the need to recognize that there are two different nations with two different peoples existing on the island. There should first be two constituent states with a degree of autonomy, states that would later, gradually find ways increasingly to cooperate and would become one nation out of functional necessity; economic realities will help facilitate true reunification. Returning to a situation in which one community ruled the island with certain specified "minority rights" guaranteed to the other was not, in his view, a realistic approach. The EU's decision to allow a divided Cyprus into the EU had only further exacerbated a difficult situation.

¶4. (C) Durbin encouraged Turkey to take bold steps for peace, noting that if Turkey makes a gesture and the Greek Cypriots do not reciprocate, the world will know, and he will challenge the ROC to answer in kind. He also commented that he was encouraged by his visit and Turkey's efforts to resolve its differences with neighbors Cyprus and Armenia. Gul responded that Turkey is "problem-solving" and recognizes the need to have good relations with all its neighbors. He referred to GOT tolerance of more than 70,000 illegal Armenian workers in Turkey, encouragement of direct flights

between Istanbul and Yerevan, bilateral cultural exchange programs, and an invitation to Armenia to join the Black Sea Economic Cooperation organization and GOT accreditation of the GOAM's Ambassador to its secretariat in Istanbul as

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evidence of GOT seriousness. "I trust President Sargsian and believe he trusts me. Let's set aside issues related to a resolution in the US Congress. We seek good relations with Armenia and will continue to work toward that." However, Gul warned that passage of a congressional resolution would make it impossible to continue the initiative because the atmosphere would become too poisonous.

15. (C) Senator Durbin also raised the long-standing problems of the Greek Orthodox Church and asked if there is any way the GOT could find a way to allow the Halki Seminary to function as intended to train new priests in the Orthodox faith. Gul responded that GOT officials are sympathetic to the needs of the Church in Turkey, calling the Patriarch and church members "our citizens, who provide us with richness of diversity." He believes a way can be found to solve the problem, but it has legal ramifications that impact how all institutions of religious teaching are treated.

Deputy Prime Minister Cicek

16. (C) Deputy Prime Minister Cicek said he was well aware of the long-term importance of US-Turkey ties; he was the only one still in politics who had worked with former Turkish President Ozal. Turkey today is working with the U.S. constructively in a wide region. On Cyprus, Cicek reiterated that Turkey supports the goal of a settlement, but that any solution needs to be fair and lasting. The "TRNC" and "President" Talat are making great efforts to resolve differences, but unilateral efforts in this regard will not be enough. He added that one needs to understand the "facts of the island": that there are two equal communities; the Turkish Cypriots "are not a minority." He pointed to deals the Greek Cypriots have signed to purchase arms worth \$200 million from France and Russia. Such deals make it difficult to believe they're seeking a long-term peaceful settlement.

17. (C) Senator Durbin pressed Cicek for Turkey to show its support for peace and stability on Cyprus by symbolic gestures such as permitting overflights of Greek Cypriot civilian aircraft on the Turkish Cypriot side, and establishing an international group to study the future of Varosha. Cicek replied that Ankara believes there is room for openings on both sides, but insisted that the Turkish Cypriots already have taken steps "such as approving the Annan Plan" and that it is time for the Greek Cypriots to reciprocate. Still, if the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots is lifted, the Turkish side would be ready to open the airport (NOTE: This seems to refer to Nicosia Airport, closed since 1974. END NOTE) Senator Durbin underscored that if Ankara were to take a step, he would ask the Greek Cypriots to do the same. He noted that he hopes that in the future both sides do not look back and say that an historic opportunity had been missed.

18. (C) Durbin also appealed to Cicek to "start a dialogue" with Greece on reopening Halki Seminary. Cicek responded that there are no specific regulations against Halki but that a 1974 general law applies to all theological faculties and stipulates that they must be connected to state universities. The law is aimed primarily at regulating private Islamic schools. Otherwise, "Turkey would turn into Pakistan." He noted GOT officials have been working on finding a solution on Halki and sympathized with the Church's wish to train priests. The Halki question is not political, it is judicial. Turkey does not want to open itself to radicalism. At the same time, Cicek asked rhetorically if Greece should not pay attention to the ethnic Turks living in Thrace, whose rights are "routinely violated."

¶9. (C) MFA Deputy Under Secretary Haydar Berk and DDG for Northeast Mediterranean Kerim Uras offered CODEL Durbin a lengthy briefing on Turkey's perspective of the historical basis of negotiations on the Cyprus issue and said Turkey's support for a Cyprus settlement envisions a united island that would have a "significant, positive" impact on the eastern Mediterranean. However, Ankara remains concerned about the current "unfriendly posture" of the Greek Cypriots. Senator Durbin noted that if Talat and Christofias could be

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given a helping hand, they could succeed. MFA U/S Ertugrul Apakan emphasized at a follow-on lunch that the GOT seeks a special envoy on Cyprus from the US. Not someone so senior that he or she overshadows UN Special Rep. Downer, but someone who can ensure the US is engaged. The US represents fairness, justice, and balance on the Cyprus issue, according to Apakan. "We need your involvement." Apakan also underscored the hands-off approach the GOT is taking on Cyprus negotiations, saying, "Talat does not need us to negotiate for him." He noted that DDG Uras goes to the island once every couple weeks to get updates on the negotiations, but senior officials travel only on a quarterly basis to the island and, contrary to claims by Greek Cypriots that he is pulling Talat's strings from Ankara, Apakan claimed he had not spoken to Talat on the phone "in months." The problem according to Apakan, is that the Greek Cypriots "are not doing the intellectual work necessary to find a settlement, because they don't want a federation, they don't like power-sharing, and they don't like the idea of a 'new Cyprus.'"

¶10. (C) Durbin asked if it would be possible for Greece and Turkey to open a conversation on Turkish schools in Greece and the Halki Seminary in Istanbul. Berk insisted that Ankara had asked for such a dialogue two years ago, but had received no reply from the GOG. He said Turkey has signed 33 agreements with Greece, some with the assistance of the USG, such as the 1997 Madrid Agreement about the Aegean. The level of Greece-Turkey trade now stands at 3 billion Euros. Greek investment in Turkey exceeds 5 billion Euros. It is an ongoing process. Berk also noted that the two countries engage in a mechanism called the Exploratory Talks regarding the Aegean. Senator Durbin said the visit to Turkey by Greek PM Karamanlis, the first such visit in 49 years, had not seemed to be recognized by Ankara as a courageous and valuable gesture. Berk seemed taken aback and replied that the Turkish Prime Minister himself had visited Greece "several times," and it was good that Karamanlis had finally been able to reciprocate. He said both Athens and Ankara "have complaints" but that Ankara is trying to take a positive approach. He suggested that the Greek Government has created a negative public opinion toward Turkey, and "now they say that public opinion ties their hands."

¶11. (C) Durbin promised to reach out to FM Bakoyannis on the issue, which he did in a February 20 phone call following his meeting in Istanbul with the Ecumenical Patriarch (ref). Conveying Bakoyannis' expressed willingness to discuss the issue and the Patriarch's expressed hope that GOT officials would engage him on concerns of the Church, Durbin spoke with Dep U/S Berk by phone prior to his return to the US February 20. Berk said he was encouraged by the responses and that he would be happy to meet with the Patriarch personally. They agreed to keep this initiative quiet for the time being.

CODEL Durbin did not have an opportunity to clear on this message.

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Silliman